

Gone Missing

The importance of educating families about keeping the guest of honor around for the funeral.

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People frequently say to me, “I’ll just remember them the way they were.” Of course, those of us in deathcare should not be surprised by this reflection; after all, many people have never been taught *why* to consider keeping the body that animated life present – before and during the funeral.

As people question the value of funerals, part of your gatekeeper role is to theme everything you do with information, education and choices. Why? Because a general trend we have witnessed is that for a substantial number of people, the presence of the body at the funeral has become not only optional but even undesirable.

This article reviews some of the historical wisdom surrounding the function of the dead body being present during the funeral. In addition, I hope the content helps you to enhance your capacity to educate families when questions come up related to this important topic.





As you know, the initial funeral element is the visitation, historically called a “wake” or “viewing.” The term “wake” comes from the Middle English *waken*, meaning “to be awake” and “to keep watch.” It was often customary for the family and primary mourners to keep an around-the-clock vigil over the dead body. The body was kept in the home, often on display in an open casket in the parlor. Mourners took turns sitting with the body 24 hours a day to offer prayers, pay their respects, receive friends and comfort one another. Essentially, they were, in part, saying hello on the path to goodbye.

In these days gone by, the guest of honor wasn’t just present at the visitation – the body was the focal point of the entire funeral process, from the procession into the church to the procession out of the church to the procession to the cemetery through to the committal. The body never left the family’s sight – or their heart.

Yet in recent decades, the trend has been toward body-absent ceremonies, which can seem more like parties than authentic funeral experiences. Historically, we understood the essential, universal need to honor and affirm the life of the person who died

with the body present throughout the entire funeral process. Now, the guest of honor is often missing.

We seem to be forgetting what many have known since the beginning of time. Throughout human history, clans and tribes revered and stayed present to the body until it was laid to final rest. In fact, cultures the world over have demonstrated a passion to recover the “fallen warrior” and dignify the death by bringing the body home.

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Of course, it is important to note that we should always be respectful of exceptions. For example, not all faith communities find it appropriate to spend time with the body. In Judaism, families sit Shiva without the presence of the person who died.

In addition, there are times when the body has been traumatized and an “appropriate memory picture” is not available to be viewed. In situations like this, other steps can be taken to help families with the lynchpin need of mourning, which is acknowl-

edging the reality of the death. Obviously, this is one of the main functions served by having the body present.

Have you ever heard someone say, “Well, it’s just a shell”? In my experience, this is often an attempt to render the body irrelevant and make it disposable. Regardless of your faith (or lack of) in the soul and the afterlife, the body of the person who died is still precious. It still very much represents the person you love. This is the body that animated life! Doesn’t this person deserve to be accompanied or seen through to the end of their days on earth, which includes the disposition of their body?

Of course, I don’t need to tell you that a dead body is not the same as the person we loved. No matter your spiritual beliefs, it is clear to anyone who spends any time at all with the dead body of someone they cared about that the soul no longer resides there.

But when we are grieving, the mind seeks proof. So, if we are fortunate, we see the body, we touch the body, we spend time with the body... and our minds, which so very much want to deny the truth, cannot help but begin the process of acknowledging the reality of the death.

Bereavement originates from the word “reave,” meaning “to be deprived of” or “to be forcibly robbed of something.” When we experience the death of someone loved, we are indeed forcibly robbed of something very precious. But for a short time – a few hours or days after death – we have the opportunity to still be *with* the person in the form of the dead body, even as we have no choice but to begin to take leave of them.

So, not only is the dead body “proof” for our logical mind, but it is also a means of transition for our searching heart, which so much yearns to still be with the person. It can feel uncomfortable and painful in the moment but is ultimately helpful and healing.

And what of the common objection, “I don’t want to remember him that way”? My experience suggests that the image of the person in death does not become the lasting image in the mind of the survivor. While the sight and presence of the dead body meets the cognitive need to

verify the death, that very image usually fades and it’s the living memories that are everlasting.

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I’ll never forget the 102-year-old woman who entered a funeral home to attend a friend’s funeral. The director was greeting guests as she arrived. The elderly woman took his arm and said, “I’ve never been to one of these before!”

The funeral director was quite surprised. Was it even possible that a centenarian had never attended a funeral? So, he asked, “This is the first funeral you’ve been to?”

“No,” she chastised. “Of course I have been to funerals. But I’ve never been to one where the person who died wasn’t there. Where the hell is he? Does he have something better to do than be at his own funeral?”

My hope is that the next time

a family says, “I’ll just remember him the way he was,” or “It’s just a shell,” you will reflect on this article and help them better understand the value of having the body present – open-casketed, closed-casketed or in the form of cremated remains – throughout the funeral process.

Remember, a meaningful funeral is not about denying death but befriending it. Let’s not dispatch with bodies but treat them with the reverence and respect they deserve. Perhaps most of all, let’s remember the value of the need to say hello on the pathway to goodbye. ☸

Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America’s leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. Contact him at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.



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